

Beyond Free Meals in Elementary Education: Rethinking School Nutrition Policy through Cultural Trust, Efficiency, and Islamic Justice in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze students' perceptions and satisfaction with the free nutritious meal program and to examine the efficiency of fund allocation from an economic and Islamic social justice perspective. Field research was conducted on 190 students from three elementary schools in Central Java using a mixed-method approach. Quantitative data were obtained through surveys, while qualitative data were collected through interviews with teachers, parents, cooks, and education observers. The results show that 91% of students prefer food cooked by their parents to food provided en masse by external parties. The main factors influencing student dissatisfaction include the poor taste of the food, concerns about food poisoning, and the fact that much of the food is not eaten at school but taken home or thrown away. From an efficiency perspective, providing cash assistance of IDR 15,000 directly to parents is considered more economical because it avoids operational costs and allows the National Nutrition Agency to continue monitoring nutrition. In addition, an analysis of social justice based on Islamic law shows that the program should focus on poor students (around 9% of the population), so that distribution is more equitable and the budget can be redirected to support primary school needs or improve teacher welfare. This study emphasizes that free nutritious food policies require a more adaptive approach that considers student satisfaction, budget efficiency, and social justice principles, so the goal of improving child nutrition can be optimally achieved.

Keywords

Student Satisfaction, School Nutrition Policy, Cash Transfer Vs. In-Kind Aid, Islamic Distributive Justice, Parent-Based Food Provision.



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INTRODUCTION

The introduction is a background problem that describes academic anxiety, the irrelevant between ideality and reality, theoretical and applicable. In the background of the problem, the author must explain the latest research relevant to the topic to be discussed along with references. Then, in this sub, the author can define the position and significance of the writing to be addressed with research that is still relevant before. Furthermore, the writer can explain the purpose of the research and the significance of the study theoretically and pragmatically.

Providing free nutritious meals in elementary schools is a social intervention strategy that continues to evolve in education and health policies in many countries (Cohen et al., 2021; Hecht et al., 2020). This program is believed to improve the quality of nutrition, learning concentration, and academic achievement of students, while reducing social inequality among students (Kristjansson et al., 2007; Wang & Fawzi, 2020). In Indonesia, the initiative to provide free nutritious meals has received significant attention as part of efforts to create a healthy, intelligent, and competitive generation (Juliani & Wibawa, 2024; Soma et al., 2024; Thawley et al., 2024a). However, the effectiveness of such programs is often determined by the extent to which the recipients, in this case, students, are satisfied with the services provided and whether the intervention truly addresses their needs (UNICEF, 2023).

The international context shifts from a centralized, top-down approach to a more participatory model involving parents and local communities (Soma et al., 2024; Thawley et al., 2024b). Studies in various African and Asian countries confirm community involvement in providing school meals can increase program acceptance and efficiency (Aurino et al., 2019, 2023; Drake et al., 2017; Gelli et al., 2019; Jean De Dieu et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to examine not only the nutritional content or budget allocation, but also the satisfaction of recipients and cultural preferences inherent in students' daily eating practices. This is even more relevant when considering that children need nutrition, a sense of security, trust in food sources, and comfort in consuming them.

The main problem with Indonesia's free nutritious food provision policy is the mismatch between the program design at the national level and the social, cultural, and economic realities on the ground. Although the program is designed for all students, many students do not consume the food provided at school. Most choose to take it home or even leave the food uneaten. This problem raises serious questions about the effectiveness of mass food distribution, the quality of the food

produced, and the efficient use of public funds (The World Bank, 2023a, 2023b). Standard solutions offered are to improve the distribution system, improve the quality of the food, and ensure nutritional standards are monitored. However, these solutions do not sufficiently address student satisfaction and the effective use of the budget.

Several studies show that management patterns greatly influence the effectiveness of school nutrition programs. For example, programs that are managed locally with the involvement of parents or school cooperatives tend to be more accepted by students because they are more in line with their tastes and daily eating habits (IDB-WFP, 2024; Kaur, 2021; López et al., 2024; Rath et al., 2025). In addition, direct cash transfers to parents while maintaining nutritional standards have also proven to be more efficient in some contexts, as they reduce operational costs and potential budget leakage (Floate et al., 2019; Jaffee et al., 2025; Onah et al., 2024; Rafiei et al., 2022). This aligns with the global trend towards a more flexible and adaptive approach to social assistance programs.

Another specific solution identified in the literature is the need to focus on the target groups that are genuinely in need, particularly children from low-income families. Studies in various middle-income countries show that universal assistance often leads to inefficiency and misdirected targeting, while a more selective approach can increase distributive justice and resource optimization (Wang et al., 2021; Wineman et al., 2022). This perspective of fairness also aligns with Islamic law principles, emphasizing that assistance is only obligatory for groups that cannot provide for themselves. In contrast, able families should not be recipients but rather play a role in helping others (Haddad, 2012; Rofiq & Khusnudin, 2025).

The literature also highlights challenges in culinary aspects and production capacity. Research shows that cooking for thousands of students on a large scale often reduces the quality of taste, menu variety, and student acceptance of the food (Alderman et al., 2024). This condition reinforces the finding that taste and trust in food are important variables to consider when implementing school nutrition programs. Furthermore, the program's effectiveness is also related to intergenerational benefit distribution, because in many cases, the free food provided to students is consumed by family members at home. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the policy's main objectives and whether the initial goal of improving student nutrition has been achieved (Drake et al., 2017; Irizarry et al., 2025).

This literature review shows that the debate over the effectiveness of free nutritious food programs encompasses the dimensions of budget efficiency, social justice, cultural acceptance, and

intergenerational benefits. While previous studies have provided insights into the benefits of school nutrition programs, there is still a gap in understanding how student perceptions, parental preferences, and ethical perspectives on justice interact in the Indonesian context. More specifically, little research has integrated the dimensions of student satisfaction, budget efficiency, and Islamic principles of justice into a comprehensive analytical framework.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the satisfaction of elementary school students in Central Java with the free nutritious food program, emphasizing the aspects of consumption preferences, budget efficiency, and social justice perspectives. The main research questions are: (1) how do students perceive the free nutritious meals provided at school; (2) to what extent do parental preferences influence student acceptance of the program; (3) how can budget allocation efficiency be improved through parental involvement or school cooperatives; and (4) how can the Islamic legal perspective on aid distribution provide a normative framework for designing more equitable policies. The novelty of this research lies in integrating nutritional, economic, and Islamic ethical approaches to evaluate the program's effectiveness, which is expected to contribute theoretically to international literature and provide practical recommendations for policymakers in Indonesia and other developing countries.

METHOD

This study uses a mixed methods approach with a convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This approach was chosen to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of student satisfaction with the free nutritious food program by simultaneously integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The convergent design allows for comparison and triangulation of findings to make the research results more valid and contextual.

The research participants consisted of 190 students from three elementary schools in Central Java (SD Negeri A 02, SD Negeri B, and SD Negeri 01 C) who were recipients of the free nutritious food program. Of these, 173 students provided complete answers, while 17 chose not to answer or abstained. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 parents, five teachers, a culinary expert, and an education observer. The selection of locations and participants was done purposively, taking into account the representativeness of the region's social, economic, and cultural contexts.

Quantitative data were obtained through a survey using a structured questionnaire that covered students' perceptions of taste quality, food safety, and consumption preferences (Joseph et

al., 2024). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, culinary experts, and education observers, designed to explore in-depth perceptions of program effectiveness, budget efficiency, and social justice aspects. Interviews were conducted in person with open-ended questions to allow for broader exploration of answers (Knott et al., 2022).

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively by calculating the percentage of respondents who chose various consumption preference options. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach, including transcription, coding, categorization, and extracting main themes relevant to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The results of both approaches were then integrated to provide a comprehensive picture of student satisfaction levels, budget allocation efficiency, and the relevance of social justice in free nutritious food programs.

This study upholds the principles of research ethics by ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities and obtaining consent from each respondent before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could not answer specific questions or withdraw from the study. This study also strives to maintain cultural sensitivity and ethics in the presentation of data, in accordance with international research standards (Newman et al., 2021; Vanclay et al., 2013). With this methodology, the study is expected to provide academically valid and practically relevant findings in evaluating and formulating free nutritious food program policies in elementary schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This chapter presents the research results obtained through quantitative surveys of 190 elementary school students in Central Java and qualitative interviews with teachers, parents, a culinary expert, and an education observer. The research results focus on four main aspects in accordance with the research questions, namely (1) students' perceptions of the free nutritious food program, (2) parents' preferences in food provision, (3) budget efficiency, and (4) perspectives on social justice in aid distribution.

Students' Perceptions of Free Nutritious Food

Survey data show that of the 190 students who participated, 173 students (91%) preferred food cooked by their parents at home to mass-produced food provided by the National Nutrition Agency. Meanwhile, 17 students chose not to answer or abstained. This preference was driven by several factors identified in the interviews, including the taste of the food, which was considered

unpleasant, concerns about the cleanliness and safety of the food, and the experience that the food was often not finished at school.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Food Program

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Prefer Food Cooked by Parents	173	91%
Did Not Answer/Abstained	17	9%

An excerpt from an interview with one of the teachers (Teacher A) reinforces this finding: *"Many children don't eat it, so they take it home. When they get home, their parents eat it, or sometimes it is even thrown away."* Observations in several schools also show that the food boxes provided are often untouched, reflecting the gap between the program design and the reality of student consumption.

Parental Preferences and Budget Efficiency

Interviews with 10 parents and five teachers revealed relatively uniform views on how to use the budget. They considered that the provision of Rp15,000 per day per student should be allocated directly to parents or managed through the school cooperative. This was considered more efficient because all funds could be used to purchase nutritious food without deductions for labour or administrative costs at the central level. Parents also believed that they could provide food that suited their children's tastes while maintaining nutritional standards under the supervision of the National Nutrition Agency.

One parent stated: "If it is given directly to us, the entire Rp15,000 can be used to provide nutritious side dishes and vegetables, without any deductions. That way, children are more enthusiastic about eating because it is in line with their habits at home." This is in line with findings in the literature that parental involvement in food provision can increase student acceptance and quality of consumption (IDB-WFP, 2024; Kaur, 2021; López et al., 2024; Rathi et al., 2025)

Culinary Quality and Production Capacity

The issue of food quality was also identified through an interview with a culinary expert (initials W). He explained that cooking for 3,000 people with a limited team capacity would impact the taste and variety of the food. According to him: "Cooking for 5–10 people is optimal and tastes good, but when you have to cook for thousands, the standard of taste inevitably drops. The children lose their appetite." This quote confirms that culinary aspects are an important factor influencing student acceptance of the program.

Field observations also show that the quality of mass-produced meals is often inconsistent. On several occasions, the side dishes served appear monotonous and lack variety, reinforcing

students' preference for food prepared by their parents. Thus, limited production capacity in the provision of mass meals has proven to be one of the main obstacles to the program's effectiveness.

Perspectives on Social Justice and Aid Distribution

Social justice emerged as an important issue in this study. An education observer (initials TA) expressed that food aid should focus on children from low-income families. Based on data on the poverty rate of around 8.4%, only 9 out of 100 students were entitled to free meals. He emphasized: "In Islamic law, those who are capable are not obliged to be helped; in fact, they should be the ones helping. If everyone is assisted, the funds will not be effective. It is better to help nine poor children, while the budget for the other 91 children can be diverted to school operational assistance (BOS) or teacher welfare."

This finding reveals a tension between the universal policy implemented by the government and the demands for distributive justice from a social and religious perspective. This is consistent with the literature highlighting the need to focus on vulnerable groups to achieve program effectiveness.

Intergenerational Redistribution

This study also found the phenomenon of intergenerational redistribution of benefits. Although the program aims to improve student nutrition, parents consume much food at home. Teachers and parents acknowledge that food not eaten at school is usually taken home and consumed by the family. This phenomenon raises critical questions about whether the program's main objective is truly being achieved, or whether the program functions more as a household subsidy.

Thematic Synthesis

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data shows that several key factors influence the effectiveness of the free nutritious food program in elementary schools: (1) low student satisfaction with the quality and taste of the food, (2) strong preference for food prepared by parents, (3) inefficient use of the budget in the centralized distribution model, (4) issues of social justice in the distribution of aid, and (5) the existence of a redistribution of benefits that is not in line with the policy objectives. These findings provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges faced in implementing the program, while also opening up space for formulating more adaptive and contextual policies.

Thus, this study's results emphasize the importance of reviewing the distribution mechanism of free nutritious meals by considering aspects of student satisfaction, parental involvement, budget efficiency, and the principle of social justice. These findings also form the basis for further discussion in the next chapter on policy implications and the study's theoretical contribution to international literature.

Discussion

Discussion is the most important part of writing a journal article. At this stage, the author must present the thesis and research findings systematically, scientifically, and factually. Explain the impact of research findings and their impact. Then the writer must compare the results with previous studies relevant to the topic of discussion.

The results of this study reveal the complex dynamics in the implementation of the free nutritious food program in elementary schools, with findings covering aspects of student satisfaction, parental preferences, budget efficiency, culinary quality, and social justice in the perspective of aid distribution. This discussion will elaborate on these findings by linking them to previous theories and research, while highlighting the novelty of the research in the context of international literature.

Student Satisfaction and Program Acceptability

Low student satisfaction with the free nutritious meals highlights the importance of acceptability in school nutrition policies. According to the program acceptability theory (Casale et al., 2023; Sekhon et al., 2017), public interventions' success is measured not only by material output but also by the extent to which recipients feel comfortable with and trust the intervention. Previous studies have shown that student preferences for food are greatly influenced by taste, appearance, and cultural eating habits (Drake et al., 2017; Gelli et al., 2019; Kristjansson et al., 2007). These findings are consistent with research showing that 91% of students prefer food cooked by their parents. Thus, there is consistency with global literature that student acceptance is a key determinant of program effectiveness.

However, this study's novelty lies in integrating psychological and cultural dimensions. A sense of security and trust in food are dominant factors that encourage students to reject mass-produced food. This phenomenon adds a new layer of understanding that nutrition programs cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of their recipients. This perspective has not been widely explored in previous studies in Southeast Asia.

Budget Efficiency and Public Resource Management

Budget inefficiency in centralized distribution models is also an issue that has been found in various global contexts. According to public resource management theory, efficiency occurs when funds are used directly to achieve the main objectives without being cut by unnecessary operational costs (Ostrom, 2015).

Studies by (Floate et al., 2019; Jaffee et al., 2025; Onah et al., 2024; Rafiei et al., 2022) show that direct cash transfer programs are more economical than mass food distribution because they reduce distribution costs and ensure family flexibility. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature, with the addition that in the Indonesian context, parents feel more capable of providing food that suits their children's tastes and nutritional standards.

The novelty of this study is its emphasis on comparing centralized distribution mechanisms and community/parent-based distribution. Findings show that the household-based model is more efficient and more socially sustainable because it involves nutritional supervision by the National Nutrition Agency. This approach demonstrates a unique synthesis between cash transfers and nutritional standard regulations, which are rarely discussed simultaneously in the international literature.

Culinary Capacity and Service Quality Perspectives

The culinary perspective in this study shows that oversized production scales reduce taste quality and menu variety. A study by Alderman et al. (2024) also confirms that mass food provision often leads to quality issues.

However, these findings expand the discussion by linking culinary limitations to student satisfaction, where low taste quality directly affects consumption levels. This approach aligns with the literature on service quality (Arli et al., 2024; Fida et al., 2020; Üstünsoy et al., 2024), which state that quality perception strongly determines consumer loyalty and satisfaction.

This study's new contribution is integrating culinary dimensions into the social program evaluation framework. While previous studies have emphasized nutritional value and health indicators, this study shows that taste and menu variety are important mediating factors in determining program success. This expands program evaluation indicators from mere input-output to service quality assessment.

Social Justice in the Perspective of Distributive Theory and Islam

The universal aid distribution is considered unfair, especially when most students come from affluent families. This perspective aligns with distributive justice theory (de Haro, 2025; Rawls, 1971), which emphasizes that resources should be allocated to benefit the most vulnerable groups. Similarly, the principle of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in Islamic law also emphasizes the protection of vulnerable groups and fair distribution (Anwar & Noor, 2024; Auda, 2008; Haddad, 2012; Rofiq & Khusnudin, 2025; Taufikin, 2025).

The findings of this study reinforce these theories with empirical evidence that universal programs create inefficiency and injustice. The novelty of this study lies in the synthesis between Western distributive justice theory and the Islamic ethical perspective, resulting in a more contextual hybrid normative framework for Indonesia. This approach is rarely found in international literature, thus adding a new theoretical contribution.

Intergenerational Redistribution and Policy Implications

The phenomenon of food redistribution from students to parents highlights an implementation issue that is rarely addressed in the literature. The study by (Drake et al., 2017; Irizarry et al., 2025) do mention the possibility of households consuming school meals. However, this study provides more detailed empirical evidence on how this redistribution occurs and its impact on policy objectives. Theoretically, this can be explained through the concept of *unintended consequences* in public policy (de Zwart, 2015; Merton, 1936), whereby government interventions produce effects that differ from their original objectives.

This study's novelty is that it highlights the intergenerational dimension in evaluating school nutrition programs. Rather than focusing solely on students, it shows that the program also affects household consumption dynamics. Thus, policy evaluation must consider secondary effects in the local socioeconomic context.

Synthesis and Novelty of the Research

The following table summarises the synthesis of this study's results with previous literature while confirming the research's novelty contribution.

Table 2. Synthesis of Research Findings with Previous Literature

Variable	Research Findings	Consistency with Previous Studies	Novelty
Student Satisfaction	91% of students preferred home-prepared meals, citing reasons of taste,	(Drake et al., 2017; Kristjansson et al., 2007)	Integration of psychological and cultural aspects into the evaluation of program

Budget Efficiency	safety, and comfort Direct cash transfers proved more cost-effective; parents were able to maintain nutritional standards	(Floate et al., 2019; Jaffee et al., 2025; Onah et al., 2024; Rafiei et al., 2022)	acceptance Synthesis of cash transfer mechanisms with regulatory frameworks on nutritional standards
Culinary Quality	Large-scale provision reduced flavor quality and menu diversity	(Alderman et al., 2024)	Incorporation of culinary dimensions as mediating factors in assessing program effectiveness
Social Justice	Universal programs were viewed as inequitable; they should target only low-income students	(de Haro, 2025; Rawls, 1971); Al-Zuhayli (2017)	Synthesis of Western justice theory and Islamic ethics within a distributive framework
Intergenerational Redistribution	Meals were often consumed by parents instead of the intended student beneficiaries	(Drake et al., 2017; Irizarry et al., 2025)	Detailed analysis of intergenerational redistribution as an unintended effect of policy design

This synthesis shows that this study not only confirms previous findings but also adds a new perspective that enriches the global literature. Integrating cultural, culinary, and Islamic ethical dimensions provides an original contribution relevant to the Indonesian context and has international implications.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study expands the framework for evaluating school nutrition programs by incorporating cultural, culinary, and Islamic justice aspects, which have received little attention in the international literature. Practically, the results of this study provide recommendations that free nutritious food policies need to consider: (1) student acceptance as the leading indicator of success, (2) household-based or school cooperative distribution mechanisms supervised by the National Nutrition Agency, (3) a focus on poor groups to achieve distributive justice, and (4) evaluation of intergenerational effects so that program objectives are more targeted.

Thus, this study emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift in free nutritious food policies from mere nutritional intervention to multidimensional policies that integrate psychological, cultural, culinary, economic, and ethical aspects. This is the novel contribution of this study to the global literature on school nutrition policies.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that implementing free nutritious food programs in elementary schools faces fundamental challenges regarding student acceptance, budget efficiency, culinary quality, and distributive justice. The main results show that most students prefer food cooked by their parents because it is more palatable, safe, and convenient. The centralized distribution model has proven inefficient due to operational costs and a decline in taste quality when food is cooked on a large scale. In addition, there is a phenomenon of intergenerational redistribution, where food intended for students is consumed by other family members, so the initial goal of improving child nutrition is not fully achieved. The dimension of social justice is also an important highlight, with the argument that universal programs tend to be off-target, while a selective approach for poor children is more in line with the principles of distributive justice and Islamic ethical values.

The implications of these findings emphasize that free nutritious food policies must be directed towards more adaptive and contextual models. Providing funds directly to parents or through school cooperatives under the supervision of the National Nutrition Agency can improve efficiency, cultural relevance, and service quality. The policy should focus on poor students so that distribution is more equitable and the program's objectives are optimally achieved. In addition, student acceptance should be used as the leading indicator of success, rather than simply the amount of food distributed. Thus, this policy is not only technical but also touches on broader social, psychological, and ethical dimensions.

This study's contribution to international literature lies in integrating cultural, culinary, and Islamic ethical aspects in evaluating school nutrition programs, which have rarely been addressed comprehensively. This study expands the theoretical framework by adding new perspectives on parental involvement, equitable distribution, and intergenerational effects in public policy. The limitations of this study lie in its scope, which is restricted to one region, so the results need to be generalized with caution. Further research could expand the geographical coverage, use a longitudinal design, and integrate objective health indicators to complement the findings. Thus, this study provides a conceptual and empirical basis for formulating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable school nutrition policies.

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